Japanese Reticence in Cross-Cultural Situations: Can It Be Communicative?

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In recent years scholars have shown that silence is not just a gap between speeches but a communicative act through which a variety of messages are conveyed. It is also known that the attitudes toward silence vary from culture to culture. Japanese culture, for example, is considered to have a comparatively high tolerance of silence, which is indicative of their deep-rooted culture-specific values.

The aim of this paper is to review Japanese silent behavior by examinig some case studies, and to consider the sociocultural rules that seem to affect their behavior. It is also intended to stress the importance of applying this knowledge of behavioral differences when teaching English to Japanese students. This, in turn, will help the students avoid possible silence-related cross-cultural communication breakdown in years to come.

Key Words: Silence, Cultural Values, Cross-Cultural Communication, Teaching English

I. INTRODUCTION

Silence is a communicative act that has illocutionary force and perlocutionary effect. Silence is used to question, promise, deny, warn, threaten, insult, request, or command (Saville-Troike, 1985). Traditionally, however, linguists have tended to ignore cultural interpretations of silence and the types of social contexts where it regularly occurs (Basso, 1972). It appears that silence has been regarded as a space between messages, not as a message in itself. However, silence is not a passive act; it is a functional component of communication along with speech. If indirect speech is a way of 'saying one thing and meaning another,' as Tannen (1985: 97) states, 'silence can be a matter of saying nothing and meaning something.'

Different cultures have different attitudes toward silence. Basso (1970) reports that Western Apache permits a comparatively high degree of silence in conversational encounters. The Apache Indians choose to be silent when the situation is uncertain. For example, when they meet strangers they tend to be silent and do not introduce themselves. Most of the Americans, on the other hand, feel quite uncomfortable about silence (Hopper, 1979) and try to fill the eerie

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conversational gap. Compared to Americans, Japanese seem to have higher degree of tolerance toward silence. Indeed, Japanese are inclined to be taciturn on many occasions. In Japanese soap operas, for example, there is a large amount of non-vocalization, whereas there is little in American counterparts.

Although silence is a communicative act, it is often much too indirect, vague, polysemic, and confusing for satisfactory communication. Accordingly, if a person from one culture fails to decode the message of silence conveyed by a person from another, this will cause a cross-cultural communication breakdown.

In this paper, we will discuss what perlocutionary effects are expected by Japanese silence and what kinds of Japanese silent behavior confuse cultural outsiders and are thus potentially problematic for cross-cultural communication. In so doing, we will employ the four dimensions of Japanese silence proposed by Lebra (1987). We will also touch on the sociolinguistic rules or cultural values that underlie their silent communication. Finally, we will stress the importance of including our discussion in English instruction in Japan.

II. JAPANESE SILENCE: OVERVIEW

It appears that silence is a virtue in Japan. It is no exaggeration to say that ideal communication is conducted without a talk, or, at the very least, with as few words as possible. There are a number of untranslatable words and phrases that refer to this Japanese style of silent communication. Examples of these words are as follows:

阿吽の呼吸 [aun-no kokyû] (the minds of two people running in the same channels)
つうかあの仲 [tsûkâ-no naka] (relationship between the two people on the same wavelength)
以心伝心 [ishin denshin] (direct communication from mind to mind like telepathy)
腹芸 [haragei] (a knack for making his views felt)

Also, subjects, objects, or both are often omitted from Japanese sentences, which we call 'syntactic silence.' For example:

帰ったら	電話	します。
kaettara	denwa	shimasu
when (I) return	phone	will do

'(I) will call (you) when (I) get home.'

As Saville-Troike (1985:5-6) notes, Japanese writing has silences. Japanese novelists often use the

silence marker '....'. In haiku poetry, one of the masterpieces composed by Matsuo Basho (1644-94) is nothing but the repetition of a place name:

松島や	ああ松島や	松島や
matsushima-ya	aa matsushima-ya	matsushima-ya

Although what Basho saw cannot be conveyed to the reader as a direct message, this haiku poem is considered as one of his masterpieces, because this poem suggests that the landscape be so beautiful that even Basho could not describe it in words. Thus, the poem is successful in conveying his emotions. In Japan the prevalence of silence is observed very widely regardless of the form of communication.

III. THE FOUR DIMENSIONS OF JAPANESE SILENCE

Lebra (1987) categorizes Japanese silence into four dimensions: truthfulness, social discretion, embarrassment, and defiance. These dimensions are not necessarily unique to Japanese communication style, but they may be marked in other cultures in other ways.

1. Truthfulness

It is often said that Japanese have a strict distinction between inner self and outer self. In other words, they have two faces that they alternatively reveal depending on the situation. It follows that Japanese tend to think what is spoken by somebody does not always reflect his or her inner (i.e., true) self. Thus a taciturn person is more trusted than a talkative one. Many proverbs reflect a distrust of the talkative persons, warning them as below:

口に蜜あり、腹に剣あり [kuchi ni mitsu ari, hara ni ken ari] (Honey in the mouth, a dagger in the belly.)
はなし半分 [hanashi hanbun] (Believe only half of what you hear.)
美言真ならず [bigen shin narazu] (Beautiful speech lacks sincerity.)

Kunihiro (1976) observes that one qualification of ドン [don] (a "big shot") in Japan is silence, namely, to say little, and to do so with complete lack of eloquence. This is even true of the prime minister. The late Mr. Ohira was nicknamed the 'Ah-uh Premier' because of his hemming and hawing. But, as Mizutani (1981) notes, most Japanese accepted his somewhat slow and clumsy speech style. Another example is Mr. Nakasone who is nationally known as 'a man of silence and patience.' It appears that the silence of "big shots" is related to their dignity. In

addition, the Japanese think that men should be more silent than women. It is often the case that a Japanese mother scolds her son saying, "You are too talkative for a boy. Quit talking so much."

2. Social discretion

According to Lebra (1987), "social discretion refers to silence considered necessary or desirable in order to gain social acceptance or to avoid social penalty." Silence in this dimension conceals rather than reflects truth. In order to live in a group-oriented society like Japan where conformity or harmony of the group takes precedence over individuals' opinions, it is necessary for people to hide their inner feelings in order to act in concert with others. Vocal hesitation is understood as a sign of modesty, politeness, empathy, and a desire to avoid humiliation (Lebra, 1987:347).

Pauses are used between turns at talk, which show polite avoidance of interruption. Furthermore, Japanese take advantage of these pauses to select appropriate words in a particular situation. This kind of polite pause may not function in intercultural communication.

Nitta (1987) observed encounters in Waikiki between Japanese tourists and American Hare Krishna followers. At the Honolulu International Airport, the former were asked for a donation by the latter in Japanese. The Japanese were trapped in passive silence because the Hare Krishna devotees forcefully demanded the donation without giving the listeners a chance to ask. This incident shows that Japanese passive silence may work against them when their interlocutors do not understand the politeness conveyed by silence, but intend to exploit the silence for their own advantage.

Again, there are many proverbs that point to the value of silence which reflects social discretion.

言わぬが花 [iwanu ga hana] (Better to leave things unsaid.)
口は災いのもと [kuchi wa wazawai no moto] (The mouth is the source of trouble.)
物言えば唇寒し秋の風 [mono ieba kuchibiru samushi aki no kaze] (If you talk, your lips will feel cold in the autumn winds.)

3. Embarrassment

Embarrassed silence is typically observed between people in an intimate relationship, for example, among a small group of peers (i.e., schoolmates, coworkers) and among the members in a family (i.e., husband-wife, father-/mother-child) (Lebra, 1987:349). In Japanese conjugal relationships, it is common that husband and wife are in love but too embarrassed to express their feelings in speech. For example, a husband and wife often do not express their affections in words.

Very few husbands say 愛しているよ [aishite iru yo] (I love you) to their wives. It sounds more like a translation of the English equivalent. This is also true of lovers. In a talk between Shiina (1985) and his friend, Yamashita, this topic was discussed in the following way:

> S : If a man has a normal feeling, he doesn't say Aishiteru yo (I love you). You don't say this, do you?
> Y: Absolutely not. Instead, I may say quietly, 'The flowers are beautiful,' looking the other way. And my girlfriend would be sensitive enough to understand my message. If she doesn't get the message, I can add, 'The birds are singing.'
> S : That's right. That's right. [Translated by Numaya]

In the case of husband-wife relationship, the wife may express her love to her husband by dressing and undressing him, as pointed out by Lebra (1987:349).

The silence of embarrassment is observed on a somewhat formal occasion, too. Naotsuka (1981) reports the following story:

> An English lecturer, who had been teaching at a Japanese women's university for a few months, felt that it was very warm and humid in the classroom. He excused himself to the students for taking off his coat and asked one of the students sitting at the front desk if he might open the window.
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> The lecturer expected the immediate response of "yes" since the question was a polite formality. To his surprise, the student kept silent. He wondered if she had not understood his question, and asked it again. But the result was the same. He gave it up and finished the lesson with all the windows closed.
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> A few days later, the lecturer told this experience to his Japanese colleague, who then talked with the student and found out why she had not given the expected answer to her teacher's question: "Although I understood perfectly what our teacher had said, and wanted the window to be opened, I was unable to say "Yes" because I was not the representative of our class."
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> The Japanese student did not feel that "May I open the window?" was a question to her personally, but that because the request was made publicly she was supposed to give him a general opinion based on group consensus. (Naotsuka, 1981:111)

This kind of Japanese silent behavior may give the impression to foreigners that "Japanese have no personal opinions," or "Japanese lack independence," or "Japanese are reluctant to take responsibility."

Japanese silence that reflects embarrassment is often accompanied by a smile. This type of Japanese smile looks mysterious to non-Japanese. Seward (1968) notices that the Japanese smile not only when they are pleased or happy, but also when they are embarrassed and when they are sad or even when they are angry. He believes that the Japanese are concealing their inner consternation and sadness, feeling that it is impolite to disclose these feelings. Hall (1987) warns, "Do not assume that a smile means the Japanese are pleased or are agreeing with you, since they often smile or laugh when embarrassed."

4. Defiance

Unlike the third dimension, defiant silence is openly expressive and assertive. This dimension is used to express estrangement, hostility, or defiance (Lebra, 1987: 350). In other words, defiant silence implies "I disagree with you," or "I object," or "I am angry with you," or "I hate you." This type of silence is typically observed between a husband and wife whose relationship has broken down.

IV. SOCIOCULTURAL RULES IN JAPAN

1. The insider-outsider framework

As mentioned earlier, Japanese perceive themselves to have inner and outer selves. 本音 [honne] and 建前 [tatemae] are the words that correspond to these two selves. The former is what you truly think or your personal opinion. The latter is an official policy or, in other words, the opinion of the group. *Honne* is related to feeling expressed among insiders, called Dimension 1 (truthfulness), whereas *tatemae* is related to behavior displayed among outsiders, or Dimension 2 (social discretion). As long as Japanese can judge whether an occasion calls for behavior appropriate to Dimension 1 or Dimension 2, there is no problem; however, in intercultural communication, Japanese tend to come to a deadlock because non-Japanese are not so aware of the insider-outsider framework. Japanese find it difficult to communicate with foreigners without the framework which guides their perception and actions toward others. Japanese may try to convey their messages through facial expression or silence, but a foreigner may find it difficult to judge from the smile of a Japanese what his or her real feelings are, even though that expression is readily understandable to another Japanese (Mizutani, 1981). An example of this is the case of Hare Krishna given above.

In order to invite an outsider into a Japanese' inner realm, the Japanese need to collect as many pieces of information about the person as possible. So, he/she may ask a lot of personal questions to the outsider, which makes a foreigner feel as though his/her privacy is being violated. As for the Japanese, these questions are just a reflection of friendliness.

2. Social hierarchy

Japanese social hierarchy involves asymmetrical power relations based on age, gender, socio-economic status, etc. In a sense, Japanese silence is defined as an inferior's obligation and a superior's privilege. For example, in the presence of their boss, Japanese workers tend to be silent,

so as not to contradict his/her intention. (In the movie entitled "Gung Ho", this boss-subordinate relationship is observed in a little exaggerated way.) Social hierarchy is thus deeply related to Dimension 2 in which *tatemae* is required.

V. CONCLUDING REMARKS

Silence is not just a space between messages. It is not a passive act, either. Silence is a means of communication by which a variety of messages can be conveyed. Yet, it is an indirect way of communication and each culture has its own different values behind it, which often leaves room for an intercultural communication breakdown.

Lebra (1987) classified Japanese silence into four dimensions: truthfulness, social discretion, embarrassment, and defiance. These dimensions are deeply connected to Japanese sociocultural rules such as the insider-outsider framework and social hierarchy.

Japanese silence is fairly communicative among Japanese, but their silent messages are often ignored or misinterpreted by people from other cultures. In order to avoid such a communication failure, it is important for Japanese to know their own values behind silence in comparison to those in other cultures.

An American educator by the name of Moore (1987) points out the importance of knowing the value of silence in Japan when teaching Japanese students at an American university:

> Sometimes in intercultural communication, the value of silence is overlooked. Most Americans are familiar with the expression "silence is golden," however, they usually believe that ideas and comments must be put into words to be communicated. Speaking indicates that a person is paying attention and has ideas or opinions. To Americans, silence usually has a negative connotation—displaying tension, awkwardness, or shyness.
>
> "Hollow drums make the most noise" is a favorite Japanese proverb related to the value of silence. In Japan, speaking too much is a sign of immaturity. Silence can convey respect for the person who has spoken or provide a means of unifying a group (Condon, 1984). Keep in mind that most Japanese students have been taught that to listen respectfully is the appropriate behavior for one in a subordinate position.

Japanese teachers of English also need to include this kind of information in their instruction, so that their students can understand the difference of the cultural values behind silence.

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